DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 324 670 CS 212 524

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TITLE Context and Critical Perspective: Meeting Black Autobiography Halfway.
PUB DATE Nov 89
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (79th, Baltimore, MD, November 17-22, 1989).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Autobiographies; Black Culture; *Black Literature; Black Studies; *Cultural Influences; Language Role; *Literary Criticism; Literary Styles; Literature Appreciation; *Social Influences; United States Literature
IDENTIFIERS Voice (Rhetoric)

ABSTRACT

Black autobiography can only be viewed sensibly in the classroom if an attempt is made to come to terms with the social and historical milieu in which the work was produced and with the persona and ethos of the writer. Critical failure to do so puts critic and text at a serious disadvantage because such failure restricts critical vision to the point of absurdity, insisting by implication that the social and historical milieu of the critic is the only valid context for viewing the work. Booker T. Washington's embarrassingly simplistic "Frederick Douglass" (a biography) is an example of a reductive misreading which creates the impression that Douglass did not really put his heart into all that firebrand abolitionist rhetoric he was putting out and was regretfully driven into such rhetoric by the times. Black autobiographers have inherited from Douglass the dual and simultaneous purpose of creating a voice to be heard within their subculture as well as obtaining acceptance in larger social settings through the power of a sanctioned language. Awareness of each historical and social milieu occupied by the individual writer leads to an enhancement of the student's capacity for understanding each individual work. (KEH)

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CONTEXT AND CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE: MEETING BLACK AUTOBIOGRAPHY HALFWAY

Context, a problem in looking at any piece of literature, is a particularly pressing concern in the consideration of autobiography, which may be viewed as either the creation of a life or the recounting of a life. Further, autobiography may sensibly be viewed in a variety of other lights: i.e. as a structural work of art, as the mirror of an age (or at least of its sensibility), as confessional or apologia, as historical account, as political polemic, and so on. The problem of context in the treatment of autobiography is further exacerbated by the various complexion it exhibits in American letters, ranging from Benjamin Franklin's memoirs through Henry Adams' Education, to the occasionally vitriolic maundering of Mary McCarthy. This breadth of variety, even in the relative cultural mainstream, is overwhelming.

None of these works (nor, one suspects, any others -- consider for example Anne Bradstreet's spiritual autobiography, or Zora Neale Hurston's Dust Tracks on a Road) can be sensibly viewed by a critic who does not make some attempt to come to terms with the social and historical milieu in which the work was produced and with the persona and ethos of the writer. Critical failure to do, or at least to attempt to do this, puts both critic and text at a serious disadvantage because such failure restricts critical vision to the point of absurdity, insisting by implication that the social and historical milieu of the critic

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is the only valid context for viewing the work, and that the persona and ethos of the critic/reader constitute the only refractive lens for the text in question. Such a reading is embarrassingly simplistic (as an example, Booker Washington's Frederick Douglass, a rigorously limited reading of the Douglass's own Narrative and My Bondage and My Freedom comes to mind) and even when dictated, as Washington's reading largely was, by political necessity, reductive. What such a reading process does is diminish the reading experience from an interactive and dialogic process to one that is merely monologic and interpretive.

Such a reductive approach can be applied with the justification that critical distance from the work itself and from the time in which the writing was done makes for unbiased perception and clarity of vision. Like most justifications, this one is to some extent true. The danger, however, is that the critic in this instance is likely to forget that his own age and critical training are in fact as temporally provincial as those of the writer under his glass, and that the history of criticism is largely a history of taste; he is rather apt to impose his own standards on an age and writer to which they may not be especially germane. When this happens, the work and writer in question become the joint victims of a sort of critical double whammy in which the critic is free to dismiss the writing for being too much of its own age (or other referent point) or too far from it, without ever openly exposing his own critical bias

and system of thought. The writer, in some sense, is damned if he does and damned if he doesn't, since the critic sets the rules. Again, Washington comes to mind, since much of his Frederick Douglass (a biography) is devoted to creating an impression that Douglass didn't really put his heart into all that firebrand abolitionist rhetoric he was putting out, and was regretfully (!) and regrettably driven into such rhetoric by the times. A similar sort of reductive misreading occurs in James Matlack's "The Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass" when he dismisses the social analysis in the second autobiography as literarily incorrect, without defining in terms relevant to the primary text (My Bondage and My Freedom) a proper sense of just what constitutes 'the literary.'

This critical double whammy is particularly complicated in the consideration of literature by Black Americans because of the (often unconsciously) political nature of the mainstream canon of American Literature, in which some discourse has been privileged for no better (or other) reason than its ethnic origin. Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin and Harriet Wilson's Our Nig suggest themselves as cases in point. As Marion Wilson Starling has pointed out, the slave narrative (the virtual beginning of Black autobiography in America) was a thriving and vital force in American letters for well over a hundred years, but the narratives were denied a place in the canon until fairly recently, and still have not received anything approaching the volume of critical attention lavished on the traditionally

accepted mainstream canon. The initial reasoning behind the dismissal of the narratives was that they arose from either the untutored and therefore unreliable consciousness of the slave, or from the ineptly tutored and assumed (at any rate suspect) consciousness of the freed slave or his abolitionist mentor, who might find in his own political/ideological motivations a justification for duplicity. The inherent double assumption that a writer's consciousness can be put on like a suit of clothes, or that political/ideological motivations for duplicity do not touch the critic/reader serve in large measure to institutionalize the "double whammy." Like the writer in the previous paragraph, the black narrator was damned if he did and damned if he didn't.

Starling's work in countering this kind of illusion is both noble and laudable, but not without its own irony. His autobiographical preface to The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History, reveals that he suppressed his own scholarly work during his parents' lifetime in order not to embarrass them. This suggests, rather eloquently, the pervasive nature of the pressures which worked against critical acceptance of the narratives which constitute the earliest and strongest Black autobiographies in American letters.

Like other Blacks who wrote and published narratives, Frederick Douglass was a many times victim of the double whammy. Initially, he was denied use of the educated idiom of his age by the abolitionist mentors who urged him to tell his story simply and without bombast so that they might elaborate upon it, or, to

call a spade a spade, so that no one would confuse his discourse with that of the white mentor whose consciousness was allowed to interpret and judge. When Douglass developed his own voice and editorial style, employing them in the Black Abolitionist paper, the Northern Star, he was faced with defection by those same mentors, of whom William Lloyd Garrison was foremost. Ironically, today it is the stark simplicity of the Narrative, with its stylistic affinity for at least one aspect of the modernist aesthetic (or what might be called the Strunk and White standard of eloquence), which is generally held as his superior work. This suggests, of course, that critics are applying a modernist standard to nineteenth century prose (a practice which is, in itself, suspect) and that the Black writer, Frederick Douglass who was first denied access to the language he needed to work effectively by his abolitionist mentors in his own era, is today being denied the same access by contemporary scholars and critics.

The work which Douglass needed to accomplish was, in fact, peculiarly dependent on his mastery of that idiom which represented the educated and privileged discourse of his own time, for he had in hand the dual and simultaneous purpose of demolishing the institution of slavery and of creating his own character, a process which required commentary as well as narration, reflection and judgement as well as action. He has left his successors an uneasy heritage. Zora Neale Hurston's Dust Tracks, with its insistence on transcendence of 'mere'

racial categories and its carefully machined, unified surface that does not allow the inevitable anguish of the Black artist at the time of the Harlem Renaissance any expression, is evidence of that heritage. Like Douglass, and like her predecessor in black female autobiography Jarena Lee, she refuses to say a good deal about her personal life, although she is far more duplicitous about it. By falsifying her birth date, she deletes ten years and (as Alice Walker points out) a possible marriage from her life. Douglass and Lee achieved much the same sort of editorial feat by simply refusing to commit to paper anything beyond the public identity they wished to have recognized. Another of Douglass's heirs, Richard Wright, has produced in Black Boy a work which is (like the Narrative and My Bondage) very much about language, and the power of sanctioned language which was so difficult for a Black to acquire. Without coming to possess such language, the Black writer had (and presumably has) little if any voice outside his own subculture (itself a significantly loaded term). The dilemma is rife with absurdity. Wright's early model? H.L. Mencken, a figure it is at best difficult to imagine fully understanding Wright's position as an American writer.

What is to be gained here, from these earlier Black writers, is the chance to meet them on something like their own terms, to take the text on the terms it demands. This does not mean that critical standards fall by the way, but that they are arrived at, in each case, by an honest attempt to understand the time and place of the text itself, of the social and historical position

occupied by the writer and of the social and historical position the text addresses as well as of the literary conventions with which the address is concerned. By doing this, the critic enables the critical sensibility of his own place and time to interact with the text without being dogmatic or reductive, and to come to the reading of such books as John Edgar Wideman's Brothers and Keepers with an enhanced capacity for understanding.

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